



# Developing Adaptive Learners

*A program for promising administrators can provide your future leaders  
with the tools they need for success*

**A**fter three years as an assistant principal, Kevin Hobbs was excited when he was named principal of Parkland Middle School in Montgomery County, Md., but he was also intimidated by the obstacles he faced.

Hobbs felt he could make a difference at a school that had not fared well on state achievement tests and was on the state's needs improvement list. The resources were in place, and Superintendent Jerry Weast had made it clear that improvement was a priority.

The challenges, however, were daunting. Half of the school's student body lives below the poverty line. Most families do not speak English as their first language. Fifty-five new staff members had to be hired—immediately—and an aerospace magnet program was to be in place when school started.

And it all had to be accomplished in temporary quarters,

## **Gail Covington McBride**

across town, while a new building was being built.

"I felt woefully inadequate for this task," Kevin said recently. "It wasn't until near the end of that first year that I realized that although I had a lot more to learn, I had been well prepared for the challenges that I faced."

Today's school leaders, much like Kevin, face increased demands to raise the academic bar while closing the achievement gap. There is a greater focus on more collaborative leadership, more demands for community involvement, and a greater need for data-driven decision making and the use of technology. Our district's Leadership Development Program for new middle and high school assistant principals provides leaders with the tools to meet these challenges.

Now in its 18th year, the program has evolved from a model where experienced administrators helped new assistant principals on accepted practices to a model of research, case

study, and reflection. Today, our program has four main components: a professional development team, mentor consultant support, leadership seminars, and a multiyear learning community/cohort program. We believe this adaptive leadership model serves our developing administrators best in the changing, challenging landscape of today's schools.

### Professional development teams

Six times a year, for two years, each new assistant principal meets with a professional development team that includes the principal, director of school performance or community superintendent, and a retired principal mentor. The two-hour meetings accelerate the novice administrator's professional development and provide us with the opportunity to evaluate performance under our district's six standards for school leaders. Assistant principals who don't demonstrate adequate developmental growth do not continue in the program and are returned to a former position.

We know we are asking new administrators to undergo a transformational personal change process that involves new learning and the fears and anxiety that accompany it. The team members are positive role models who communicate in a calm, positive manner. Since teams are together for two years, professional relationships that develop are maintained over time.

In the meetings, team members ask probing questions to help the administrator reflect on significant challenges or events. By providing varying perspectives and insights, they help the assistant principals explore their leadership challenges and reflect on their decision-making skills.

The questions are designed to lead an analysis of the administrators' leadership behaviors. To prevent the relaying of details about what happened and direct the focus to a rich analysis—team members ask questions such as:

- Was it a technical challenge that could be addressed by existing procedures or strategies, or was it an adaptive challenge? How did you know what type of challenge you faced?
- Was the outcome what you expected or was there an unanticipated result?
- What is your hunch about how your behavior contributed to this event's success? If unsuccessful, how did your behavior contribute to problems that arose?
- What will you do in the future if you face a similar situation or challenge?

For Kevin, the team meetings were "at first intimidating." Meeting with his community superintendent, principal, and mentor in a formal setting required him to explicitly think about his leadership and openly reflect and problem solve. The team helped him identify the school's issues by looking at student achievement data. In preparing for the meetings, Kevin learned how to analyze student achievement data, use the data to engage staff, develop strategies, and monitor their effectiveness.

"It may sound simple," Kevin says, "but being put under this pressure to identify, fix, and prove it prepared me more than anything else for what I later had to do as a principal."

### Mentor support

In addition to meeting with the professional development team, the new assistant principal is matched with a retired principal who is contracted to provide several hours of one-on-one mentoring support biweekly for the length of the development program.

In team meetings, the consultant ensures that program processes are being followed. After meetings, the consultant and the administrator debrief to clarify issues that arise and "read between the lines" when necessary. Since consultants have no role in the assistant principal's evaluation, they can function as a critical friend and confidant in navigating the political terrain.

The consultant meets the assistant principal at the school site and can attend meetings, shadow the developing administrator, provide feedback, and help with management strategies and skill development.

Kevin's assigned consultant met with him regularly and asked questions that required him to reflect and learn. On one of her first visits, they conducted a classroom observation then compared notes on what each had observed.

"The consultant pressed me," Kevin says, "about whether this teacher should be teaching and what my plan would be to deal with his deficiencies. In retrospect, it would have been easy to avoid the hard work, but pointed questions about the impact on students forced me to deal with inadequate teaching head on."

The consultant observed Kevin in multiple settings and gave him frequent feedback. She reviewed his writing and helped keep him focused on student achievement data. "Maybe most important," Kevin says, "she always answered the phone when I had just had 'one of those days.'"

Several years later, Kevin still has a relationship with his mentor. "We e-mail frequently, meet for breakfast occasionally, and most importantly, she still answers the phone when I need to talk to someone, because those days still happen," he says.

### Leadership seminars

The on-site principal often has the most influence on a new administrator's development, but our program also includes monthly, full-day leadership development seminars on system initiatives, procedures, and best practices. The seminars provide an environment in which developing leaders can plan, take action, and step back to reflect on what occurred.

Superintendent Weast also spends time with cohort members to help them understand the "big picture" of the legal and social context of their work. This time commitment and personal engagement by the superintendent speaks volumes

about our district's commitment to building leadership capacity from within.

Since adults learn best from their own experience, time is devoted during each seminar to exploring the new assistant principals' leadership challenges. We use a "Case in Point Process" to explore participants' leadership challenges and help them to see a variety of options for action. Author Ronald Heifetz calls these "adaptive challenges," because they reveal a contradiction in values or a gap between what people say they value and believe and the existing reality.

The cases discussed in the seminars reflect the complexity of problems our new assistant principals face. New assistant principals framed some in this way:

■ "We are recognized as one of the top 100 high schools in America based on Advanced Placement participation and success, but for over three years there has been no growth in the percentage of minority students enrolled in AP classes. How do I help the teachers I supervise see the urgency of improving the academic achievement of our minority students?"

■ "In our special education department, we want teachers to focus on improving student achievement by raising expectations, analyzing data, and teaching to the state academic standards. In reality, many teachers have expressed their belief that the students are not capable of high achievement. How do I motivate staff to accept the belief in high expectations for all students?"

Using Heifetz's "Adaptive Leadership Framework," which is supported by research that links leader behaviors to student achievement, allows new assistant principals to move away from research-based techniques and take a focused look at persistent, messy problems where no easy answers exist.

In Kevin's first year as an assistant principal, he worked with a very experienced school leadership team that had little experience working with student achievement data. The principal and professional development team pushed Kevin to respond to the new federal No Child Left Behind law by examining student achievement data teacher by teacher.

Kevin knew changes had to be made—he just didn't know how to make them. The school's leadership team had to learn how to monitor student data and talk openly about teaching and learning. By working with his principal and team he approached this adaptive challenge in a thoughtful and planned way and reflected on it during the regular professional development team meetings.

### A cohort model

In many districts, new assistant principals are left to their own judgment, which limits growth as an educational leader. Our program, which includes monthly training seminars using a cohort model, gives new administrators the opportunity to work in learning communities and within a stable group over a two-year period. At the seminars, participants work on skill building, explore leadership challenges, share best practices,

exchange ideas, and talk about problems together.

The relationships and trust developed as part of the cohort experience are often long lasting, and members continue to rely on one another for support when they become principals. Kevin says he still relies on the administrators who were in his cohort.

"When I deal with a problem or obstacle, I am not dealing with it just from the perspective of my limited experience," Kevin says. "Because of the bond we have developed, I solve problems often with input from the people that I can be open with and trust. It is comforting to know that one of my colleagues may have already had experience dealing with a problem and that they will share what they learned and brainstorm with me."

First-year principals also receive additional support. For several hours each month, a consulting principal observes the first-year principal at work, writes performance reports, and provides one-on-one support to deal with the job's day-to-day challenges. Kevin worked closely with his consultant, who "would push and question me."

"I really appreciated it because I felt like once she and I worked through a problem, then I was on firm ground to deal with whatever problem we were facing," Kevin says. "She also helped me in the area I had the least experience in, which was the political minefield of being a principal. I quickly got into the habit of running things I was doing by her first, and more than once she kept me from making poor decisions by asking me good questions and making me defend my ideas."

Margaret Spellings, the U.S. secretary of education, was impressed when she visited Parkland and asked how long Kevin had been in the position. She was surprised when he replied, "Seven months," and asked our superintendent how we were training our new administrators.

Even though Spellings seemed surprised that someone so new at the job could have such confidence and competence, it is no surprise to us. The adaptive leadership and success of Kevin Hobbs is the type of performance that we expect from all principals who "graduate" from our leadership development program.

New principals are ready for the job's challenges because of a district-wide commitment to the professional growth of new assistant principals. Is our program time-consuming? Very. Does it add more work to already demanding workloads? Yes. But we would not have it any other way.

Building the leadership capacity of others is one of the most important jobs we have. Ultimately, this commitment and the learning of everyone involved may be the "silver bullet" of our success. ■

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